COMMUNION MEDITATION
John 17:20-26
October 6, 1974

During the "Battle of Britain" in 1940, one of the Third Reich's major targets was the English industrial city of Coventry. The blitz was heavy and efficient and one of the casualties was Coventry Cathedral, seat of the Anglican Diocese, a marvelous old structure built in the Middle Ages. The Cathedral was totally devastated with the exception of the tower and a portion of the exterior walls.

After the war, Coventry, along with every other major British city, began to clear the rubble and rebuild. But instead of levelling the bombed out skeleton of the old church, the tower and walls were ~~allowed to stand~~ left standing, and a magnificent modern cathedral was erected immediately adjacent. The idea was that people ought to be reminded visually, of the destruction and inhumanity of war: but also that out of the ashes and blood of human conflict ~~the resurrection~~ hope and healing can happen ~~hope is born~~. The theological theme that informed the architecture of the new building is "reconciliation". ~~Out of its own tragic experience the parish today lives with a special sensitivity to human conflict. "Reconciliation" teams from the parish are sent to any place in the world where men are suffering because of conflict.~~

It's a magnificent edifice and a magnificent idea. But the most impressive visual experience for me was to stand inside the ruins of the old sanctuary: where the high altar once stood, a plain rectangular altar has been constructed out of clunks of old masonry. On the wall behind is a large cross made of two charred pieces of roof timber. And across the front of the altar two words are inscribed: "Father Forgive."

I had heard the story of Coventry: I had seen the pictures: But standing in front of the altar - looking at that cross and the two simple words, one could not help but experience a sense of urgency about the idea of reconciliation - brotherhood - unity - oneness: that glorious vision of one human family: the vision ~~that~~ which men have refused to abandon, and which has fared so ~~badly~~ poorly in human history.

As you know, it is what we are about today as we celebrate something called World Communion. Several hundred million people on seven continents are eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Lord's Supper today. Academically that's an interesting and impressive fact. But more to the point is the idea - the vision - the concept of the unity of mankind.

Regardless of the mechanics, it is an idea that is not ordinarily a priority item for most of us - or for our Church. Individually we have been nurtured on the milk of self-sufficiency. We would like to feel that we need no one. Culturally - nationally - we are having a difficult time making peace with the fact that we are a small minority within the human family, and that what is good for the United States may not be good for the rest of the world. Religiously - more frequently than it is comfortable to admit, men have used the Christian faith in order to deepen divisions between them or to create new ones. The tragic story of Northern Ireland is simply the most recent expression of a dynamic that has brought us the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Religious Wars of Europe and Ku Klux Klan.

Phylis McGinley has incorporated that sad reality into a ~~delightful~~ charming poem entitled: How to Start a War. During the Reformation there was a division over the practice of Baptism. A man by the name of Zwingli favored sprinkling: another leader by the name of Muntzer favored total immersion.

Said Zwingli to Muntzer
"I'll have to be blunt, sir
I don't like your version
Of Total Immersion.

And since God's on my side
And I'm on the dry side,
You'd better swing ovah
to me and Jehovah."

Cried Muntzer, "It schism,
Is Infant Baptism!

Since I've had a sign sir,
That God's will is mine, sir,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to hell, singly,"
Said Muntzer to Zwingli.

And each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord.

We have made progress in our day. We are no longer hurling insults, at least officially, across the theological divides. But we are a long way from unity - structurally or spiritually. When the world looks at the Church it does not, obviously, see a demonstration of the miracle of reconciliation.

In fact it still sees competition, divisiveness and sometimes bigotry. And it may be that - that is precisely why the world so often seems to turn a deaf ear toward our pontifications about love and reconciliation. At least, that is what is suggested to me by our text this morning.

The Biblical concern for unity is there from the beginning. The very basis of the faith of Israel is that there is one God who is the creator and father of all men. In the Old Testament, the Tower of Babel - the great disruption - is the tragedy against which the rest of the story must be read.

Jesus came calling God father: reminding his people that there is one God who longs to see all of his children reunited - reconciled to him and to each other. On the very night of his arrest and betrayal that is the idea he held up before them. Around the Table of the Last Supper he prayed for his disciples: not for their health or welfare or success - or even their slavation: but for their unity.

> "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." John 17:11.

And then he looked down through the centuries, and out of his own sensitivity to human sin, prayed for us....

> "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one...so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me." John 17:20-21.

That is how important the idea which this day celebrates was for Jesus Christ. God's will for us is that we be one: that we display in our common life the truth of the Gospel: that people see in us - our relationships in the Church - a quality of love so conspicuous and unmistakable that the very love of God will shine through it. Sometimes that happens in the life of a traditional Protestant parish - but not often enough . .

Not long ago I read an article by Ernest Ackerman, a Presbyterian Fraternal Worker among the Seminole Indians, about their practice of communion. It is customary, after the service, for the worshippers to gather on the Church lawn and for each person to shake the hand of every other person there. Then, with the minister and an Elder in the center, an individual may work his or her way through the group to shake the hand of a particular person. and then stand with that perso

("The first time I saw this," Mr. Ackerman writes, "I turned to the Elder and asked what they were doing. He whispered in my ear, 'They have had bad feeling. — But this is Communion.'"

With biting candor the author continues ...

"On those rare occasions when I may sit in the pew of a fine Church and receive the elements in the Sacrament my mind is naturally on reconciliation. But what kind of a nut would people say I am if I were to submit to the urge to shake the hand of every other person there, with the certainty that each of them, too, had found fresh reconciliation with the Lord of all mankind." We said Presbyterians have something to learn from our brothers..

Today, we celebrate Communion on a grand scale: a Communion that extends across the centuries and that transcends every division of nation, race or station. Today we celebrate God's process of reconciliation whereby He is bringing together the whole family of man. And yet, one can get lost in the grand ness of that. Reconciliation, as Jesus knew, begins rather modestly-between Peter and John: Andrew and James: between you and the person sitting next to you.

Frederick Buechner advises: "The next time you walk down the street, take a good look at every face you pass and in your mind say, "Christ died for thee! That girl. That slob . That phony. That crook. That saint. That damned fool. Christ died for thee: [redacted] at this +Drink in remembrance that Christ died for thee."

So, today, World Communion Sunday, is a grand and glorious vision of God's plan for his creation: a promise of what could be and what will be: a foretaste of what God is now doing among men.

But it begins modestly, personally, between individuals. Take - eat - Christ died for me - and thee. And that makes us members of one family.

Amen.

Father, stretch our minds with a new vision of your kingdom: a kingdom in which all people belong to one family. And then be with us as we celebrate that vision - as we commune with each other: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

* Hymn - go to table
* Creed

Invitation